

SOME HAFTED SHELL ADZES IN THE AUCKLAND MUSEUM

JANET M. DAVIDSON
AUCKLAND INSTITUTE AND MUSEUM

Abstract. Ethnographic specimens of hafted shell adzes from the New Hebrides and the Northern Solomons are described and illustrated.

Recent excavations in parts of Melanesia and Micronesia have uncovered large numbers of bevelled shell tools, usually interpreted by the excavators as adzes. This has aroused considerable interest in how these tools were hafted and used, and Garanger has recently described a number of examples from Museum collections (1972, Figs. 299-302). Among the Auckland Museum collections are several examples of hafted shell adzes with old and authentic lashings. These are described below, to place on record interesting examples additional to those described by Garanger and in widely scattered references in earlier ethnographic literature.

A detailed study by Mead (1968) is taken as a basis for the descriptions which follow. Mead in turn followed Buck *et al.* (1930) for terminology of parts of adzes and their handles, and Buck (1944) for description of lashing patterns.

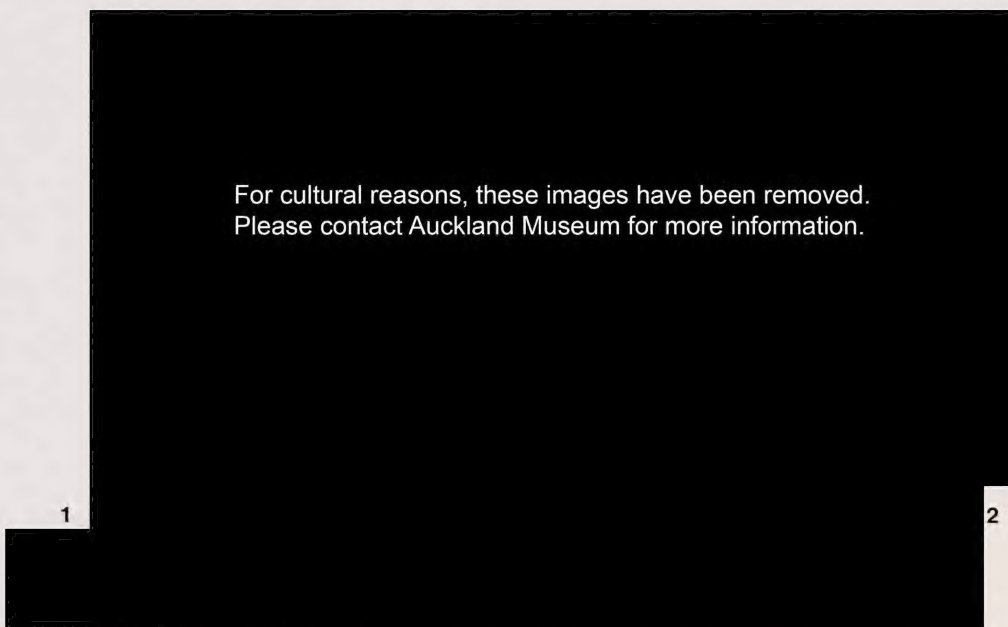
In his study, Mead distinguished between ceremonial and working adzes (1968, pp. 28-30). He found five main types of handles and five main lashing patterns. Two of his handle types are represented among the Auckland specimens: Type 1 (a branch-and-trunk handle with both heel and toe) and Type 2 (branch-and-trunk with developed toe but little or no heel) (Mead 1968, p. 374). All specimens display the multiple diamond lashing pattern (Mead 1968, pp. 37-8).

Description of adzes

Specimen 31495 O (Figs. 1, 2) from the New Hebrides consists of a *Terebra maculata* blade in a complex and ornate handle. It is part of the Oldman collection purchased by the New Zealand Government (Oldman no. 692). An old label on the handle reads "36263 Cap. E. G. Rason Com. of N.H. 1902-8".

The shell blade measures 15.8 cm in total length, with 8.2 cm visible below the lashing. It is very similar to numerous specimens recovered archaeologically from the New Hebrides (Garanger 1972, Fig. 293) and elsewhere (Davidson 1971, pp. 52-55).

The handle is complex, consisting of at least three pieces. The shaft curves up in one piece to the elaborate extremity of the heel. The toe is formed of two shaped wooden pieces forming a socket within which the blade is enclosed. The lashing on the toe binds together the blade and its socket while the upper part of the lashing attaches the toe to the rest of the handle. The distance from base of handle to extremity of heel is 50 cm; from extremity of heel to edge of blade 32 cm. In some respects this specimen resembles the rotating adzes classed by Mead as his Type 5 (1968, pp. 374, 441), but as it is now lashed, it does not rotate.



Figs, 1, 2. 1. Adze 31495 O (Oldman Collection) from the New Hebrides. 2. Detail of lashing, adze 31495 O.

The lashing is a very complex version of the multiple diamond pattern, which is seen as two patterns in the side view (Fig. 1), but as one continuous series of diamonds on the front (Fig. 2). The lashing material is a plaited three-strand cord which is almost certainly coconut fibre.

The ornate handle and lashing suggest that this was a ceremonial rather than a working adze. Yet the existence of such an elaborate artifact could not be inferred from the excavation of the blade alone.

This specimen has some resemblance to an adze illustrated by Guiart (1963, Fig. 218, p. 239). The latter, however, appears to have a blade of stone.

Specimen 41281 (Figs. 3, 4) is part of a collection of ethnographic items presented to the Auckland Museum in 1969 by a Miss Dawson. The collection belonged to her father who was a medical officer in Samoa and Tonga in the 1920s and 1930s, but no items were localised when received by the Museum. This specimen is assigned to the New Hebrides on the basis of the style of handle. It is apparently an old and authentically lashed example.

The blade is probably *Lambis* sp. and has a maximum width of 7.8 cm. The length of the visible part of the blade is 7.9 cm.

The handle is of the branch-and-trunk type with both heel and toe (Mead's Type 1), and undecorated except for the grooves on the proximal extremity of the shaft. The length of the shaft of the handle, from toe angle to base, is 39 cm; the length of the base of the foot is 22 cm, and the total distance from heel to edge of blade is 30 cm.

For cultural reasons, these images have been removed.
Please contact Auckland Museum for more information.

3

5

Figs. 3, 5. Adzes. 3. Adze 41281, probably from the New Hebrides. 5. Adze 11544, from Mortlock Is., Northern Solomons.

There is a complex socket. The blade rests in a shaped trough and is covered by a second wooden piece, the whole lashed tightly together. The lashing pattern is of the multiple diamond variety, with the diamonds somewhat elongated to fit the rather elliptical toe. The cord is a very fine plaited three-strand cord, similar to but finer than the cord on the previous specimen. At some time the lashing has been coated with some preparation, possibly a preservative, which now makes identification of the fibre very difficult.

Specimen 11544 (Figs. 5, 6) was purchased by the Museum in 1888 from a Mr G. Stuart. It is from Mortlock (Takuu), a Polynesian outlier in the Northern Solomons.

The blade is *Terebra maculata* with a maximum width of 4.5 cm and a length of 6.7 cm visible below the lashing. It is not possible to tell how much of the blade is concealed by the lashing.

The handle appears to be a knee of wood, rather than a branch-and-trunk fork. It conforms to Mead's Type 2. The total length of the shaft is 64 cm and the length



Figs. 4, 6. Detail of lashing. 4. Adze 41281. 6. Adze 11544.

of the foot is 24 cm. Although the handle at first glance appears rather crude the tool is, in fact, extremely well balanced.

The blade is set in a trough and lashed by the multiple diamond pattern. Part of the lashing passes around the columella of the shell blade (Fig. 6) as on a specimen from Nukuria illustrated by Garanger (1972, Fig. 302 E). The lashing material is a twisted two-strand cord of coconut fibre.

Another feature of this specimen is the “beard” — a bunch of individual coconut fibres which lie along the top of the blade under the lashing as a backing material, and extend at the distal end as a fringe.

Specimen 11543 (Figs. 7, 8), also from Mortlock, was also purchased from Mr Stuart in 1888. It is a very large and heavy specimen, said to have been used in canoe-building.

The blade is probably *Tridacna maxima*, but no sign of the outer surface of the shell remains. It is a beaked blade with hollow ground bevel and still retains a remarkably sharp edge. The total length of the blade is estimated at 27 cm, of which 15 cm is visible below the lashing.

The handle belongs to Mead's Type 2 and appears to be of the branch-and-trunk variety. The length of the shaft is 88 cm and combined length of blade and foot 58 cm. The weight of the hafted adze is approximately 3.5 kg.



For cultural reasons, this image has been removed.
Please contact Auckland Museum for more information.

Fig. 7. Adze 11543 from Mortlock Is., Northern Solomons.

For cultural reasons, this image has been removed.
Please contact Auckland Museum for more information.

Fig. 8. Detail of lashing, adze 11543.

The blade is set in a trough and lashed with a rather irregular version of the multiple diamond pattern. The lashing extends for a distance of 24.5 cm along the foot, well beyond the estimated poll of the shell blade. The lashing material is a coarse plaited three-strand cord of coconut fibre. There is no "beard". This specimen may be compared with the large shell adzes from Tikopia, which were also lashed with a "criss-cross" pattern (Firth 1959, p. 151).

The Auckland Museum collections also contain three other specimens very similar to no. 11544. Two of these, nos. 37615 and 37616, are also from Mortlock. They were acquired in 1964. In both, the handle is of the branch-and-trunk type rather than a knee. One blade is *Terebra maculata*, but the other appears to be *Conus*. In each case the cord and lashing are the same as on the older example. The "beard" and the passing of the lashing around the columella are present. Both specimens are lighter and less securely lashed, and appear to reflect continued knowledge of how to lash such tools, without the necessity for them actually to be used.

The third specimen, no. 14953, is from the Edge-Partington collection and has an Edge-Partington label which reads NEW HEBRIDES LEPEPERS ISLAND ADZE WITH TEREBRA SHELL (TIL) BLADE FOR INSIDE OF CANOES. The number at the base of the label is illegible but a later hand has added Q82. The specimen consists of a *Terebra maculata* blade attached to a Type 2 branch-and-trunk handle by a cord and lashing pattern identical to those on the Mortlock specimens. This adze is quite different from Leper Island (Aoba) examples illustrated by Codrington (1891, p. 314) and by Edge-Partington himself (1890, 1, pl. 148 no. 14) so its provenance may not be correct.

Discussion

Mead in his study of hafted adzes drew several tentative conclusions from the distribution of types of handles and lashing patterns. He found that the Type 1 handle had an extremely wide distribution throughout Oceania and was probably an ancient form. The Type 2 was most common in Western Polynesia, with scattered occurrences also in Fiji, New Caledonia, the Solomons and New Guinea. The multiple diamond

lashing pattern was present in East Polynesia, Micronesia and Melanesia and was probably also an ancient form. Mead also noted that different traits in the complex associated with hafted adzes (blades, handles, lashing, decorative elements) diffused independently of each other.

The specimens described above are of interest, firstly, as good examples of hafted shell adzes, and secondly, because they illustrate some of the different combinations which can occur, as a result of the wide distribution of various aspects of the hafted adze complex.

Numerous ethnographic descriptions of hafted adzes show that there was great variety in lashing as well as handles. It is nonetheless of interest that all the examples described here, from two of the principal shell adze making areas of Melanesia, the New Hebrides and the Polynesian outliers in the Northern Solomons, have the multiple diamond lashing pattern. The same lashing pattern is applied to widely different handle types, and to both ceremonial and working adzes. The handles themselves appear to provide the best guide to the provenance of the complete artifact, with the exception of the Edge-Partington specimen, if it is in fact from Leper Island.

It is also of interest to note that identical *Terebra* shell blades were applied to different sockets, in quite different types of handles, in the two different island groups. Conversely, the same type of handle within one island group could accommodate quite different blades, as for example, the *Terebra* and stone blades of the ceremonial adzes of the New Hebrides.

There is undoubtedly considerable scope for further studies of hafted adzes in the Pacific.

Acknowledgements. I am grateful to Mr C. Schollum, Department of Anthropology, University of Auckland, for photographing the specimens. Miss J. Goulding, Auckland Institute and Museum, identified the coconut fibre in the lashings.

REFERENCES

- BUCK, Peter H.
1944 Arts and Crafts of the Cook Islands. *Bull. Bernice P. Bishop Mus.* 179: 1-533.
- BUCK, Peter H., KENNETH P. EMORY, H. D. SKINNER and JOHN F. G. STOKES
1930 Terminology for ground stone cutting-implements in Polynesia. *J. Polynes. Soc.* 39 (2): 174-180.
- CODRINGTON, R. H.
1891 *The Melanesians. Studies in their anthropology and folk-lore.* Clarendon Press, Oxford. 419 pp. illus.
- DAVIDSON, Janet M.
1971 Archaeology on Nukuoro Atoll, a Polynesian Outlier in the Eastern Caroline Islands. *Bull. Auckland Inst. Mus.* 9: 1-108.
- EDGE-PARTINGTON, James
1890 *An album of the weapons, tools, ornaments, articles of dress, etc., of the natives of the Pacific Islands.* Issued for private circulation by James Edge-Partington and Charles Heape. 2 vols. 391 pl.

FIRTH, Raymond

- 1959 Ritual adzes in Tikopia. In J. D. Freeman and W. R. Geddes (Eds.) *Anthropology in the South Seas*. Avery, New Plymouth. pp. 149-159.

GARANGER, Jose

- 1972 Archéologie des Nouvelles-Hébrides. *Publication de la Société des Océanistes*, No. 30. ORSTOM, Paris. 156 pp. 304 figs.

GUIART, Jean

- 1963 *The Arts of the South Pacific*. Translated by Anthony Christie. Thames and Hudson. 461 pp. illus.

MEAD, S. M.

- 1968 Polynesian hafted adzes: a comparative study of form and decoration. Unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Southern Illinois University.